THE DOCUMENT

A Novel

“Those are the most important documents.
The ones no one asked for.”

— Osa

Part One: Orbit

Chapter One: The Same Rooms

They had been in each other's periphery for so long that when Henley finally said her name aloud — not in passing, not as a courtesy — it sounded like something retrieved from a great depth, something that had been submerged and patient and waiting for the right current to bring it back to the surface.

Bree. Two letters of breath.

They had met, if met was the right word, at a gallery opening in a former textile mill in a river town neither of them was from. Bree was there because a friend of a friend had three paintings in the show. Henley was there because he'd been traveling through and had seen the hand-lettered sign in the window of a hardware store that said: WORKS ON PAPER, OCTOBER, and something in that phrasing — the compression of it, works on paper, as though paper itself were a location one worked on or within — had made him stop and write down the address.

They did not speak that night. But they stood before the same painting for eleven minutes. Bree counted, because she had a habit of counting things when she felt uncertain about whether she was allowed to feel what she was feeling. The painting was large, a kind of pale field with a dark vertical mark near the center that was either a door or a figure or both, and next to the mark, hardly visible, a small rendered bird. Not

symbolic, not ostentatious, just a bird, present. Bree kept returning to the bird. Henley, she would learn later, had been looking at the same bird. Neither of them knew this until the third town they found themselves in together, when the painting came up in conversation the way paintings do, sideways, through some other subject entirely.

The second time was a train. Neither of them had cars — this was not a philosophy, merely a preference, a leaning toward the contingent, the scheduled, the thrown-together — and they were both traveling from the coast to a landlocked city where an instrument-maker Henley knew was staging a salon. Bree had been invited by the same instrument-maker's wife, who made large layered collages from sheet music and wanted Bree to bring some of her drawings to show. The train was the kind that still had a café car with small tables and windows that tilted open at the top. Henley recognized Bree before Bree recognized Henley, or at least he recognized the quality of her attention, the way she was studying the window not for what was outside but for the quality of light the glass was making of everything outside, how it flattened the passing fields into something that was almost a drawing already.

He sat down across from her. He said: I think we were in the same room in October.

She looked at him for a moment the way you look at a word you know you recognize but cannot quite place. Then she said: The bird.

Yes, he said. The bird.

And that was the beginning of something that did not yet have a name, which is perhaps the best way for something to begin.

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Chapter Two: What Henley Carried

Henley traveled with two bags. One was a large canvas duffel, olive green, that had been mended so many times along the strap that the mending had become its own kind of pattern. In it he kept his clothes, a change of shoes, a small cooking kit, a waterproof journal he had been keeping for six years, and a tin box that contained, at any given time, three to seven guitar picks, a folded letter from his grandmother, a dried seedpod from a tree he could not identify, and a pencil stub so short it could no longer be sharpened.

The second bag was a flat leather portfolio, hand-stitched, with a buckle that had been replaced twice. This was where he kept what he was working on: manuscript pages, loose drawings, folded reference sheets. He was, by training and by nature, an illustrator — though he would not have called himself that if you asked him directly. He would have said: I make pictures that go with words, and sometimes the words are mine. He had illustrated three books, two of which had been reviewed in journals that

twelve hundred people read, and one of which had been quietly beloved by a particular kind of reader, the kind who kept a notebook and noticed birds.

He worked in pencil, almost exclusively. He had tried pen and ink. He had tried watercolor, charcoal, gouache. He always came back to pencil. He liked the revisability of it, the fact that a line was never entirely committed, that there was always a ghost beneath what you were drawing, a palimpsest of first intentions. He thought this was not a technical preference but a philosophical one, though he might not have said so aloud.

He was twenty-two. He had grown up in the inland west, in a state where the sky was very large and the towns were very small, and he had left at eighteen with his portfolio and a bus ticket and a handshake from his father. His father was a man who did not hug but whose handshakes meant things. The handshake had meant: I see you. It had meant: go.

He had been going since.

What he was working on, in this period of his life, was a long piece he could not fully describe. It had started as an illustrated essay and had grown into something else, something that had chapters but was not quite a book, that had images but was not quite a picture book, that had arguments but was not quite an essay. He called it The Ledger when he thought about it privately, though he had not yet written that title anywhere. It was an attempt to document a kind of looking, a practice of noticing small things —

the way light moved through a particular material, the way a sound changed a space, the way an animal moved when it thought it was unobserved. He was not sure who it was for. He suspected it was for himself, and possibly for someone he had not yet met.

He thought about this sometimes on trains.

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Chapter Three: What Bree Carried

Bree drew on everything. This was not a metaphor. She drew on the backs of receipts, on paper bags, on the pale inside covers of paperback novels she had finished. She drew on her forearms when she had no paper, which her friends found alarming until they understood that it was not distress but surplus, an overflow of seeing that could not be stanched.

She worked primarily in ink, a fine-tipped pen she bought in boxes of twelve from an art supply catalogue. She went through a box every six weeks or so. The drawings were small and dense and very precise — creatures, mostly, insects and birds and small mammals, rendered with a specificity that was almost taxonomic but shot through with something warmer than taxonomy, some quality of affection that prevented the drawings from being merely accurate. She had studied illustration for two years at a school in a northern city before deciding that the school was not

teaching her anything that looking was not already teaching her, and had left with her student debt and her pens and her habit of noticing.

She was twenty-three. She had grown up in the south, in a city built on a bay, where the light was particular and the air tasted faintly of salt and diesel, and where she had spent her childhood in the company of an aunt who kept a garden full of things that had no business surviving in that climate: alpine flowers, cold-weather herbs, a small ornamental apple tree that fruited every other year with apples the size of plums. The aunt was a woman who believed that difficulty was instructive, that the effort of keeping something alive in the wrong conditions taught you something about the nature of both the thing and the conditions.

Bree had absorbed this.

She traveled with a single large bag, battered, covered in small enamel pins and a strip of luggage tape on which she had written her name and a phone number in permanent marker. Inside: clothes, pens, two sketchbooks always — one for working drawings, one for what she called permanents, drawings she intended to keep. A small sewing kit. A change of shoes. Dried noodles and a camp spoon. A book she was reading. A book she was re-reading. A paperback field guide to insects of the eastern woodlands that she had found in a box of free books outside a closing library and had not been able to leave behind.

She was, at the time she met Henley on the train, in the middle of a project she thought of as The Long Inventory. She was drawing, as completely and carefully as she could, every species of living thing she encountered in her travels. Not just the remarkable ones. Not just the birds and the larger creatures that people noticed. She was drawing the small things — the beetles under logs, the ants on hot pavement, the spiders in window corners, the moths that came to her lamp at night in cheap motel rooms. She was not trying to make a scientific document. She was trying to make a record of presence, an argument that the world was more populated than people noticed, that at any given moment you were surrounded by dozens of lives going about their business with complete indifference to whether you acknowledged them.

She had not told anyone about this project. It was too large and too strange and too possibly foolish to describe. But she had been working on it for almost a year, and the second sketchbook, the permanents book, was getting full.

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Chapter Four: The Salon

The instrument-maker's name was Dov. He was a compact man in his fifties with a white beard and hands that moved constantly, not nervously but expressively, the way a conductor's hands move even when no music is

being played. He made string instruments — not guitars or violins in the classical sense, but instruments of his own design, things that had no names because no names existed for them yet. Hybrids. Inventions. He called them voices, and he named each one, and when they were finished he gave them away to people he believed would play them.

His wife, Mariela, was a large and generous woman who had been a librarian and was now a maker of collages. She worked on the dining table, which she had extended with two folding tables, and the combined surface was always covered with layers of cut and uncut material: old sheet music, maps, botanical illustrations torn from books found in the same boxes outside closing libraries that Bree frequented, fabric scraps, strips of painted paper. Mariela did not glue anything until she was certain. She would arrange and rearrange a composition for weeks, living with it, changing it, before finally committing the pieces to their positions. Henley had once watched her move a single small piece of music — four bars of something, torn from a larger page — from one corner of a composition to a spot near the center, and then back, and then to the center again, and then she had looked at it for a long time and said: Yes. That's where it wanted to be. As though the paper had a preference.

The salon was held in the long main room of their house, which was an old house in a neighborhood that was being slowly reclaimed by artists and craftspeople who had been priced out of the city's more fashionable

districts. The walls of the room were hung with Mariela's finished collages and with one of Bree's drawings — a large one, done as a commission the previous year, of a moth with a wingspan the size of a hand, rendered so precisely that you could see the individual scales on its wings. The drawing made the room feel inhabited by something ancient and gentle, which was what Bree had intended.

About twenty people came. They ate soup and bread at a long table and then Dov brought out the voices and passed them around and the people who could play played and the people who could not play made sounds anyway, and the room filled with a noise that was not quite music but was not quite not music either. Bree sat cross-legged on the floor with her sketchbook and drew the instruments and the people's hands holding the instruments. Henley sat in a chair at the edge of the room and watched everything, the way he always watched, with a quality of attention that some people found unsettling and others found flattering and which was simply the way he looked at the world when the world was worth looking at.

At some point in the evening Bree held up an instrument she had been handed — one of Dov's voices, a small thing with a gourd body and strings made of something silky and pale — and she looked at it from below with one eye closed, framing it against the ceiling light. She did not know Henley was watching. He had been watching for several minutes. He was memorizing the angle of her chin, the way her wrist bent, the quality of her

attention, which was the same quality he had noticed at the gallery in October. The same complete, unapologetic presence.

He thought: I would like to draw that.

He took out his pencil and he did.

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Chapter Five: After the Salon

They stayed after everyone else had left, not by arrangement but by the natural drift of the evening, which had slowed like a stream widening into a flat place and become without anyone deciding this the kind of night where going required more effort than staying.

Mariela had put on music, something old and quietly declarative from a record that had been played many times. Dov was washing dishes with the focused pleasure of a man who had been on his feet talking all evening and found in the hot water and the rhythm of it a kind of restoration. Bree and Henley were at the long table, which had been cleared of the soup things and on which Bree had spread her sketchbook open.

She was not showing him the sketchbook, exactly. She had opened it to make a note and the note had led to a drawing and the drawing had led to a question from Henley about the instrument she had been rendering, and the question had led to a conversation about Dov's instruments that led

to a conversation about what made a sound a sound versus a noise, and Henley had reached across to point at something in the drawing and the reaching had been entirely without self-consciousness, which Bree noticed, because she was accustomed to people being cautious about touching her work, treating it with a reverence that she found well-meaning but slightly suffocating, as though the drawings were more fragile than they were.

He touched the page without asking. He pointed at the strings she had rendered. He said: You got the resonance somehow. In the lines. I don't know how you do that in ink.

She said: I don't know either. I think it's about leaving space.

He considered this. He said: I do the opposite. I fill the space and try to make the filling feel like absence.

Bree looked at him. She said: Show me.

He reached for his bag. He took out his portfolio and opened it and laid a page on the table beside her sketchbook, and she looked at it for a long time. It was a drawing of a room — an interior, spare, a window, a chair, something hanging from a peg on the wall that might have been a coat or might have been a person depending on how you looked at it. The room was dense with pencil work, hatched and crosshatched and layered, but the effect was not of a full room. It was of a room that had been left. Of a space where something had recently been and was no longer.

She said: Oh.

He said: Yeah.

They were quiet for a while. The music played. From the kitchen came the sound of Dov stacking plates, a sound like the slow period at the end of a long sentence.

Bree said: Where are you going next?

Henley said he was not sure. He had a commission in a city to the north, an illustration for a children's book about tides, but the deadline was not for another month and he had not settled on a route. He said: Where are you going?

She said she had been thinking about the coast. Not a specific part of it, just the coast, the general idea of it. She had been inland for several weeks and wanted water.

He said: The coast sounds good.

It was not an invitation, exactly. It was more like a statement of shared alignment, the way you might say: yes, I also think it's cold today. But when Bree closed her sketchbook and Henley closed his portfolio and they said goodnight to Dov and Mariela and thanked them and stepped out into the night air, they walked to the corner together and stood for a moment at the place where their routes would diverge.

Henley said: I'll probably take the train along the coast road.

Bree said: That's the same train I was planning to take.

She said it simply, without inflection, neither concealing nor emphasizing anything. He said: Good. And they stood at the corner a moment longer, in the easy silence of people who have stopped needing to fill silences, which was remarkable, given that they had known each other for approximately one day.

Then they walked to their respective places of staying, which were, by coincidence or by the tendency of artists in new towns to choose the same cheap and comfortable options, in the same direction.

Part Two: Coast

Chapter Six: The Train Northward

The train left at seven in the morning. The light at seven in the morning on the coast road was the color of watered milk, pale and slightly luminous, and it fell across the water and the low hills and the small towns the train passed through with an evenhandedness that made everything look equally important, the water and the parking lots and the painted signs on the sides of buildings advertising things that had likely closed years ago.

Bree had the window. Henley had the aisle. They had not planned this — they had boarded separately and found, arriving at the same car from different ends, that they had chosen seats across from each other. This seemed to both of them in keeping with the general character of their acquaintance: the coincidences were not dramatic but accumulated.

Bree drew. She drew the window. She drew the hills. She drew a child two rows ahead of them who was pressing his forehead against the glass with a look of extreme private concentration. She drew a cup of coffee she had bought in the station and had set on the small ledge by the window, drawing it as it cooled, and then as the surface developed the particular skin of cooled coffee, and then as she drank it, rendering the diminishing level with each successive sketch so that the series told a small story of consumption and time.

Henley watched her draw for a while. Then he opened his journal and wrote for a while. Then he looked out the window. Then he slept, or nearly slept — that state of train sleep where you are not quite unconscious, where the movement of the car becomes incorporated into whatever the mind is doing, the swaying a kind of permission, a gentle insistence that you do not need to be anywhere but here.

When he woke — or returned from near-sleep — Bree was showing him something in the sketchbook without preamble, turning it toward him the way you might hand someone a cup of water. It was the drawing of him sleeping, or nearly sleeping. She had drawn him from the side. His head was tipped back slightly against the headrest. His hands were in his lap, loosely folded. The window was behind him and she had rendered the moving landscape through it with quick, impressionistic marks that were in deliberate contrast to the careful precision of his face and hands.

He looked at it for a long time.

She said: I should have asked.

He said: No. Don't.

There was a quality in his voice — not quite moved, not performing anything — that she recognized as the same quality she felt when she had drawn it. A recognition. A wanting-to-keep.

She turned the sketchbook back and made a note in the margin of the drawing that said only: train, November.

They arrived at a coastal town mid-afternoon. The town was small and smelled of salt and woodsmoke and the low particular sweetness of kelp drying on rocks at low tide. There was a guesthouse that took in travelers, run by a woman named Osa who had been running it for twenty years and who fed her guests a communal dinner at seven and expected them to wash their own dishes and to be quiet in the mornings. Bree had stayed there before. She brought Henley.

Osa looked at them both over her reading glasses and said: Two rooms or one?

Bree said: Two, please.

Osa showed them their rooms, which were on the same floor of the house, with windows that looked out over the same strip of beach. The rooms were small and clean and had the particular smell of houses near the sea, a smell compounded of damp wood and salt and something almost sweet, like old wool. Each room had a desk, a narrow bed, a lamp, and a shelf. The shelf in Bree's room had on it a small ceramic bird, blue-green, with a cracked tail that had been repaired with visible adhesive. She set it on the desk where she could see it while she worked.

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Chapter Seven: The Low Tide Hours

The coast had a rhythm and they fell into it without discussion. They woke early, separately, and met at the communal kitchen where Osa left bread and butter and a pot of tea on the counter from six in the morning. They ate without much talking. Then they took their bags and went to their respective working places.

Bree's working place was the beach at low tide. She walked out to where the rocks were exposed, the tide pools and the wrack and the small complicated communities of things that lived in the littoral zone, and she drew. She drew barnacles. She drew the specific formation of mussels on a rock face, the way they clustered and oriented themselves, their shells all angled slightly toward the prevailing wave direction like a crowd all turned toward a sound. She drew a hermit crab in the process of house-hunting, investigating an empty shell with the tentative seriousness of someone trying on a coat. She drew a shore bird whose name she did not know, rendering it three times in quick succession as it moved, capturing the three positions of its walking like frames of a film.

Henley's working place was a table in a coffee shop on the main street. He went there with his portfolio and his pencils and his journal and he worked on The Ledger, which was in this period particularly concerned with the quality of light at different altitudes and latitudes — how the light in the coastal town was different from the light in the inland city, which had

been different from the light in the river town in October. He was trying to find a visual vocabulary for these differences that was not merely technical. He wanted the drawings to convey the emotional texture of light, the way certain kinds of light made you feel accompanied and certain others made you feel exposed.

He had coffee and more coffee. The woman who worked the counter was a young woman with paint on her wrists who asked him once what he was working on and then, when he fumbled his answer, said: Never mind. I know that look. Don't stop. And refilled his cup without asking.

In the afternoons they came together. This too had no arrangement to it, no appointment, no standing agreement. It simply happened that they were usually done with their working by two or three in the afternoon, and that the town was small and the possibilities for the afternoon limited in a way that was pleasant rather than confining, and that they both walked down to the water at that hour because that was what you did in a coastal town in the early afternoon when the light was changing.

One afternoon Henley brought his portfolio to the beach and showed Bree the pages he had been working on. She sat beside him on a flat rock and they went through them together. She said little. She pointed to things occasionally — a line she admired, a detail she wanted to understand. He explained some things and did not explain others. She noticed what he left unexplained and did not press.

She showed him the new pages in her sketchbook. The tide pool drawings. The hermit crab series. The shore bird in its three positions.

He said: These should be a book.

She said: They're not finished.

He said: When they're finished, they should be a book.

She looked at him to see if he was being kind or honest and found that in this case, which was not always the case with people, there was no difference between the two.

That evening at Osa's communal dinner there were four other guests: a couple from the northern part of the country traveling south, a retired schoolteacher who came every year, and a young woman who was, she said, on her way somewhere but had stopped here because the town had seemed right from the window of the bus and she had gotten off. They ate fish soup and bread and drank wine and talked about the coast and the weather and the small differences between this town and towns like it, and then Bree said she was going to play something, and everyone said yes, please.

She had a concertina in her bag, a small English concertina that she had been playing for four years since buying it from a musician who was giving up his flat and selling things. She played it quietly, not performing, just playing, and the sound it made was exactly right for the room and the evening and the smell of the sea coming through the window Osa had

cracked open an inch. Henley listened with his eyes open, looking at his hands, which he did when he was listening deeply, as though the music required a specific quality of attention that could not include looking at the source.

The retired schoolteacher started to cry, very quietly. No one made anything of it. It seemed appropriate.

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Chapter Eight: The Drawing That Started It

On their fourth day at the coast, Bree found something in one of the tide pools that she could not identify. It was small, pale, and alive — she was certain it was alive, though it was not moving — and it had a structure she could not classify, something that was neither quite plant nor quite animal in its form, branching and also retractile, more complex than anything she had drawn before.

She drew it for three hours. She did not take it from the pool. She sat on the cold rock beside the pool and drew it from multiple angles, each drawing smaller than the last as she worked her way toward the thing's essential geometry. She had no idea what it was. The not-knowing seemed important, seemed like the point of it, seemed like exactly the kind of not-knowing her Long Inventory was about. The world was full of things you could not name that were nonetheless completely, intricately themselves.

She brought the drawings back to the guesthouse and spread them on the desk in her room and looked at them. Then, without quite deciding to, she knocked on Henley's door.

He opened it. He was in the middle of something — she could tell from the pencil behind his ear and the quality of his focus, slightly disrupted, like a pool after a stone — but he stepped back from the door without hesitation. She came in. She spread the drawings on his desk beside whatever he had been working on and she explained what she had found and where and what it had done and not done in the pool.

He looked at the drawings for a long time. He picked up one of the smaller ones and held it closer. He said: What do you think it is?

She said she didn't know. She said she thought that was what was interesting about it.

He put the drawing down carefully. He picked up his pencil. He said: Can I?

She said yes.

He began drawing beside her drawing, not copying it but responding to it, making his own version of the thing — denser, more hypothetical, filling in what might be beneath the visible surface, what the structure might look like if you could see through it to its interior logic. The two

drawings began to converse. His filled-in what hers left open. Hers left open what his filled in.

Bree sat in the chair at the edge of his desk and watched. She did not say anything for a long time. Henley drew with the focused silence of someone for whom drawing was the most natural form of thinking. She recognized this because it was the same for her. She was not used to being in the room with someone else for whom this was true.

After a while he stopped and they both looked at the two drawings side by side. The unknown creature at the bottom of the tide pool, rendered twice, in two different visual vocabularies, and somehow between the two renderings more complete than either alone.

Bree said: That's it. That's the thing.

Henley said: What thing?

She said: The thing I was trying to do. The Long Inventory. But this is better. With both.

He looked at her. He said: You want to work together.

She said: I think we already are.

This was true. She had not intended it to be true when she knocked on his door, but it had become true in the half hour they had spent beside the tide pool drawings. She was not alarmed by this. She was a person who

recognized rightness when she encountered it. She had encountered it in the tide pool that afternoon, in the impossible branching thing that was neither plant nor animal, and she was encountering it now.

Henley set down his pencil. He said: I've been working on something. I've been calling it The Ledger. It's about looking. About the practice of paying attention. He paused. He said: I've been working on it alone for two years and I don't think it's quite right yet. I don't think it needs to be alone.

They sat with this for a moment.

Outside, the sea moved against the rocks with its usual indifference to human arrangements, which both of them found comforting rather than humbling, a reminder that the world did not need to be witnessed in order to proceed, that the choosing to witness it was an act of pure, unrequired generosity, and that was what made it matter.

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Chapter Nine: Osa

Osa had seen many people come through her house. She had been running the guesthouse since before the neighborhood had become what it was now, which was quieter, more deliberate, tending toward people who were stopping rather than passing through. In the early years there had been more traffic — traveling salespeople, commercial fishermen between

boats, the occasional film crew doing something on the coast. Now the guests were mostly people like Bree and Henley: makers and thinkers and wanderers of various kinds, people who carried their work with them and needed only a desk and a window and a place to think.

She liked Bree and Henley. She liked people who worked. She also liked that they were quiet in the mornings and washed their own dishes, which were her two requirements and which a surprising number of people failed on one count or the other.

On the fifth evening she sat with them after dinner when the other guests had gone to their rooms. She poured three small glasses of something dark and local that she kept for evenings when she liked the people well enough to share it. She said: What are you making?

Bree told her about the Long Inventory. Henley told her about The Ledger. They told her about the tide pool and the drawings on his desk. Osa listened without interrupting, which Bree noticed because interruption was the reflexive response of most people when presented with a project they did not fully understand. Osa simply listened and then was quiet for a moment and then said: It sounds like a document.

They looked at her.

She said: Not in the official sense. Not bureaucratic. I mean a document in the older sense. Something that proves something was here.

Something that says: look. This existed. This light fell on this water at this angle on this day and we were here and we noticed. She sipped from her glass. She said: Those are the most important documents. The ones no one asked for.

Bree wrote this down on the edge of a paper napkin: the ones no one asked for. She folded the napkin and put it in her pocket.

Later, in her room, she took out the napkin and tacked it to the wall above the desk beside the blue-green ceramic bird with the repaired tail. She sat at the desk for a long time looking at the napkin and then she opened the permanents book and began drawing with a different quality of intention than she had drawn with before, as though Osa had given her permission for something she had not known she needed permission for.

Henley, in his room on the same floor, was doing something similar. He was writing in his journal, the waterproof one, and what he was writing was not notes or observations but something more like a declaration, an articulation of purpose, the first time he had tried to say in words what The Ledger was for. He wrote for an hour. He crossed out a great deal. He kept several sentences.

The one he kept intact, unchanged, uncrossed, was: It is an argument that the world is more than it appears to those who have stopped looking.

He thought about the drawing of the unknown creature. He thought about Bree holding the concertina in Dov's long room. He thought about the bird in the painting in the gallery in October, so small you might not notice it, present with such complete lack of apology.

He underlined the sentence.

Part Three: The Ledger and the Inventory

Chapter Ten: Moving Again

They stayed at the coast for two weeks. This was longer than either of them had planned, which they discovered only in retrospect, looking at the dates in their respective journals with a mild surprise, as though time had behaved differently than expected while they were in it.

When they left, they left together. This was not decided so much as arrived at, the way you arrive at the end of a sentence — not by choosing the final word but by letting the preceding words make the choice inevitable. They had the same direction. They had a project they were starting. The train north ran twice a day.

Osa saw them off from the front step of the guesthouse. She had packed them each a small bag of provisions: bread, hard cheese, apples, a small jar of something she had put up in the summer. She said goodbye without ceremony, which was how she said most things, and watched them walk down the road toward the station with the combined quality of someone who has watched many people walk down that road and knows that most of them will come back, and that this knowing is a form of affection.

On the train, Bree spread her drawing things on the small table. Henley spread his. The table was not large enough for both sets of materials and they negotiated, moving things to accommodate each other, developing

in twenty minutes the beginning of a spatial grammar, a way of sharing a workspace that would become more fluent over the months that followed. Bree's inks to the left. Henley's pencils to the right. The working drawing or manuscript page in the center, available to both.

They were going to a city. Not a large city, not a capital, but a working city on a northern river where Henley had a contact who ran a print shop and who might be persuaded to let them use the press for a day in exchange for work or money or both. Bree had been to the city once before, briefly, and remembered a neighborhood near the river where the buildings were old warehouses converted gradually and imperfectly into studios and workshops and small shops selling the kinds of things that attract the kinds of people who go to gallery openings in former textile mills.

They talked for part of the journey and were quiet for part of it. The talking was about the project: what it might look like, how the drawings and the writing would relate to each other, whether the thing they were making was primarily visual or primarily textual or something that refused the distinction. The silence was the kind that happens when two people are both working in proximity and the working requires a quality of interior attention that talking interrupts. Bree was drawing. Henley was writing in his journal. Outside, the coast gave way to low hills, which gave way to flatter land, which gave way to the first long straight roads of the north.

At a stop in the middle of the journey, a man got on with a large cage, and inside the cage was a raven. Not a crow — a raven, unmistakably, with the wedge tail and the deep chest and the quality of sentience that ravens have, that quality of looking back, of registering your attention and having a response to it. The man sat two rows ahead of them and set the cage on the seat beside him and the raven shifted on its perch and looked around the car with a calm and evaluative gaze.

Bree drew it immediately. Four drawings in rapid succession, from her seat, at a distance that required some inference about the details. The fourth drawing had a quality that pleased her and she held it up for Henley to see. He leaned toward it. He said: Look at the eye.

She looked at the eye. She had drawn it open and glossy and with a quality of attention in it that, looking at it now, seemed to be directed not at some general prospect but at something specific. She said: What do you think it's looking at?

He said: Us, probably. They look at things that are also looking.

The raven, as if on cue, turned its head and looked directly at them. They both felt it. The specific pressure of being regarded by a thing that does not require anything from you.

Bree added a line to the drawing, a very fine one, indicating the direction of the raven's gaze. Pointing, without commentary, at the viewer.

* * *

Chapter Eleven: The Print Shop

The print shop was on a narrow street that smelled of ink and cold air. The man who ran it was called Fentress, a name that suited him — spare, slightly formal, with a dry precision about it. He was tall and wore a canvas apron at all times and had the particular kind of quietness that belongs to people who spend most of their hours in the company of machinery.

He showed them around the shop without enthusiasm but with thoroughness. There was a letterpress, very old, that he used for fine work. There was an etching press, medium-sized. There were drawers and drawers of movable type, organized by face and size, and Henley ran his fingers along the tabs of the drawers the way you run your fingers along the spines of books in a good bookshop. There were rollers and inks and screens and papers of many kinds stacked flat on shelves. The whole shop smelled of something ancient and chemical and also, underneath that, of the particular sweetness of paper.

Fentress said he would let them use the letterpress and the etching press for two days in exchange for three illustrations for a catalogue he was producing for a local craft organization. Henley said yes. Then he looked at Bree. She said: Four illustrations and we want access to your paper stock. Fentress considered this. He said: Three illustrations, access to the paper stock, and you clean up after yourselves. Bree said: Done.

They worked in the shop for two days and one very long evening. Bree made etchings. She had not worked in etching before — she was primarily an ink draughtsperson — but she found that the process suited something in her, the way the needle cut through the ground, the resistance of the metal, the fact that the image had to be conceived in reverse and then trusted to come right in the printing. She made eight plates in two days. Four of them were good. Two were remarkable.

Henley set type. He had some experience of letterpress from a summer he'd spent in a book arts program years before, and the muscle memory of it came back — the specific weight of the type, the click of locking the form, the pleasure of the proof, the way the text looked when it was impressed into good paper rather than printed on top of it, the slight debossment that made the words feel physical, present, not merely read but felt.

They made a small object together at the end of the second day — not a finished thing, just a proof of concept, four pages folded and sewn with a needle and thread from Bree's sewing kit. On two of the pages were Bree's etchings, printed on a heavy cream paper. On the other two were Henley's text, set in a typeface that was old and slightly imperfect, as though the letters had been thinking about the words while they were being composed and had allowed that thinking to show in small variations of pressure and alignment.

Fentress picked it up when they were done. He looked at it for a long time without speaking. Then he set it down on the counter and said: How many of these are you going to make?

They said they didn't know yet.

He said: When you know, come back. I'll give you the press.

This was not what he had offered before. It was more. Bree and Henley looked at each other and then at Fentress and understood that they had made something that had communicated something, had shown its nature to someone who knew how to look at such things, and that the communication had been sufficient.

* * *

Chapter Twelve: The Warehouse Studios

They found a place to stay in the warehouse neighborhood, a room in a building that was half studio and half residence, where the tenants were mostly painters and sculptors and one furniture maker who worked in the large ground-floor space and whose sawdust could be found in small quantities on every floor of the building. The room was large and cold and had two north-facing windows that gave very good working light without direct sun, which both of them preferred.

They put their working things on the single large table that was the room's central piece of furniture. Bree's inks and her new etching tools and her two sketchbooks. Henley's pencils and portfolio and journal. The four-page folded proof from the print shop, which they had pinned to the wall above the table along with Bree's napkin from Osa's kitchen and several drawings from the coast and a page torn from Henley's journal on which he had written out the sentence he had kept. The wall was becoming a document of the project's thinking, its evidence.

They worked alongside each other every morning. They were discovering the specific texture of working in proximity with someone else, which was different from working alone in ways that were sometimes generative and occasionally requiring navigation. Bree worked with music — not headphones, music in the room, usually something without words, or with words in a language she didn't speak, which amounted to the same thing. Henley preferred silence. They arrived at a compromise: music in the mornings when Bree was at her most productive, silence in the late afternoons when Henley was at his. This was not a policy they made. It was a practice that emerged.

Bree was developing the etching series. She had decided that the Long Inventory should be reproduced as etchings rather than ink drawings — the process suited the subject, she thought, the labor of the needle on the metal plate mirroring the labor of looking at small things, of giving them the

time they required. She was working on a series of plates that depicted the invertebrate life of the coast: the barnacles, the mussels, the tide pool creature she still could not name, the hermit crab in its deliberation. She worked slowly and without anxiety about the pace, which Henley noticed and found instructive. He was a faster worker and a more anxious one, prone to revising before a thing was finished, to second-guessing before the first-guessing had been fully tried. Watching Bree work cured him, a little, of this tendency.

Henley was developing the text of The Ledger. He had decided — or they had decided together, in the conversations that happened while they worked, the thinking-aloud that occupied the space between focused sessions — that The Ledger would be organized not chronologically but by quality of light. Each section would be headed by a description of a specific light-condition, the light in the instrument-maker's house on the evening of the salon, the light at the coast at low tide, the light through the north-facing windows of this room. And under each heading would be both text and image, Henley's writing and Bree's drawing, in conversation.

The furniture maker on the ground floor was a man named Solomon who had been working wood for forty years and who ate his lunch every day at a small folding table he set up outside the building's back door regardless of the weather. Bree and Henley fell into the habit of joining him. Solomon was a man who said things at long intervals that were worth waiting for. He

said: A good joint is invisible. You only notice bad ones. He said: Wood is never finished changing. You make peace with that or you go mad. He said: Everyone wants to make the thing. No one wants to take the time the thing needs.

Bree wrote down this last one. She did not use a napkin this time. She wrote it in the margin of her permanents book.

* * *

Chapter Thirteen: The Birthday

Bree turned twenty-four in the warehouse city. She did not make much of birthdays as a rule — or rather, she made of them exactly what she felt like making of them, which varied from year to year. Some years she wanted solitude, a long walk, a meal she cooked herself in a kitchen she knew well. Some years she wanted company and sound and the slight unreality of celebration.

This year she wanted to make something.

She told Henley three days before the birthday that she wanted to make invitations for a small party and she wanted to make them by hand. They went to a shop that sold art supplies and papermaking materials, a small crowded shop staffed by a man who had opinions about everything and shared them freely, and they bought supplies for making paper: cotton

linter, a mould and deckle, sizing, a pressing board. They carried it all back to the warehouse.

Making paper took most of a day. They worked at the sink and on the floor, which was already covered in a fine layer of Solomon's sawdust that adhered to everything and gave the drying sheets a faint warmth. The paper came out rough and beautiful and various, each sheet slightly different from the last because the pulp did not settle the same way twice. They cut the sheets to card-size and Bree painted on each one with watercolor, small images specific to the recipient: a bird for the person who watched birds, a plant for the person who kept plants, an instrument for Dov and Mariela who she wrote to invite though they were far away and would not come.

She wrote the invitation text in her careful hand, which was an italic she had practiced for years, not calligraphic exactly but deliberate, each letter separately composed.

There were eight people at the party. They came to the warehouse room, which Bree and Henley had rearranged to accommodate more people, pushing the working table to one wall and bringing in chairs borrowed from other rooms in the building. Solomon came from the ground floor. The woman who ran the art supply shop came, though she had only met Bree twice. Two painters from the building. A musician friend of Bree's who was passing through the city and had received her invitation, one of

the ones mailed to a last-known address, and had in fact been in the city already when it arrived, which she said she took as a sign.

The musician — her name was Petra — brought her fiddle. She played Irish dance tunes and then slower things and then, at Bree's request, a tune that was not quite a dance tune and not quite a song but something that occupied the narrow space between, a thing that made you want to move but also to be still, which is one of the better things music can do.

Bree played the concertina for part of the evening. Henley played guitar — he was a modest player, not showy, but rhythmically solid and with a quality of listening-while-playing that made him a good accompanist. Together with Petra they made a rough, warm trio. Solomon sat in the corner with his cup and his deliberate quietness and at the end of the tune set said: That's the thing. Not one instrument. All of them.

At the end of the evening, when the guests had gone and Bree and Henley had returned the borrowed chairs and cleaned up the room and the working table was back in its central position with their things spread across it, Bree stood at the window looking out at the street below. The city at night was quieter than cities usually were, a northern quality, as though the cold required a certain conservation of energy and sound.

She said: This is a good place.

Henley said: The room or the city?

She said: Both. The way they make each other.

He said: We'll leave it eventually.

She said: Yes. That's what makes it good.

He understood this. The impermanence was not a diminishment but a kind of gift, a sharpening, the way the tide pools were beautiful partly because they were temporary, partly because what lived in them was there only between one tide and the next, making the best of the window available.

He went to the desk. He opened his journal. He wrote: Bree's birthday, the city, November. The way she stood at the window. The way the light from the street made everything in the room equally present.

He wrote: I will remember this.

* * *

Chapter Fourteen: Henley's Dream

He told her about the dream in the morning, over tea. He had been three years old in the dream, or felt he had been, in the way of dreams where you know a thing without evidence. He was outdoors in winter, in snow, barefoot, which in the dream was not cold. He had been thinking, in the dream, some thought that was slow and private and had no words.

He had flown to a garden. Not dramatically, not like a dream of flying, more like a preference — wanting to be in the garden and being there. The garden was a rose garden, winter roses, bare canes, near a chimney. He had crouched by the soil and taken a handful of it and put it in his mouth. Not eating it. Chewing it. The taste of it was cold and dark and specific, the taste of a particular soil in a particular garden, and what he had felt, chewing it, was not disgust but something more like satisfaction, like the response to a food that is exactly right for the moment of eating it.

He woke before anything resolved. The dream had no ending. Just the chewing, and the cold, and the rose canes above him, and the specific quality of winter-morning light.

Bree listened without interrupting. She asked: Did you swallow it?

He said: No. Just held it for a while. Tasted it.

She said: It's about being in a place. Being literally of it.

He said he thought so too. He said: It felt like being very young in the best sense. Before you have opinions about things. Before you've decided what the world means.

Bree said: I dream about interiors mostly. Rooms that don't exist. Rooms that are almost rooms I know but wrong in one specific way — a window in the wrong place, a ceiling too low, a door that opens into another room I recognize.

Henley said: Like a diagram of something.

She said: Yes. Like being given information I have to interpret.

They drank their tea. Solomon's saw started up downstairs, the long smooth whine of it rising through the floor, the daily sound of the building beginning its work. Outside, the light was the particular flat silver of the north in late autumn, not beautiful exactly but honest, a light that did not flatter anything and therefore let everything be seen clearly.

Bree said: I think the dream goes in the book.

Henley said: Which book?

She said: Ours. Whatever we're making. The rose garden and the soil.

He said: It's strange.

She said: Everything in the book is strange if you look at it long enough.

He looked at her. She was entirely serious, which was one of the things he had come to understand about her: the seriousness was not a mood. It was a permanent quality, a way of taking things at their full weight. It coexisted with lightness, with the concertina and the party and the hand-painted invitations, but it was always underneath, the ground tone.

He said: All right. The dream goes in.

He took out his pencil. He began to sketch the garden, from memory, from the dream's memory — the bare rose canes, the chimney, the impression of snow on the ground. Bree watched. She picked up her pen. She drew him drawing, small and precise, in the margin of her working sketchbook where she kept things she was not sure about yet.

Neither of them knew, that morning, how much of the book was already written and drawn in the things they had done and seen and told each other. They were under the impression that they were still gathering material. This is usually how it works with the things that matter: you are making them long before you know you are making them, and by the time you see the shape of the whole, you have already done most of the work.

Part Four: The Document

Chapter Fifteen: Southward

Winter was setting in. The north-facing windows, which had been an asset in autumn, were now the source of a cold that pressed through the glass in the early mornings and required them to work in coats until midday. Solomon had given them a small electric space heater, which helped, but the room was large and the heater was small and the cold was patient.

They decided to move. Not away from the work — the work was going well, was in fact going better than either of them had expected, with a momentum and a cohesion that felt fragile and needed to be protected, like something that had not quite set. They would move toward a milder winter and keep working.

They went south in stages. A week in a town where Henley had a college friend who had a spare room and an understanding of the need for workspace. Three days in a river city where there was a book fair and Bree spent an afternoon at a table spread with handmade books looking at how other people solved the problem of the page, the relationship between image and text, the question of sequence. A night in a town they stopped in because the train was delayed and the delay became an evening and the evening became a reason to look around.

The moving was not a distraction from the work. The moving was part of the work. Each new place produced new material — new light conditions, new textures, new small lives to observe and record. Bree's etchings were accumulating. The hermit crab, the barnacles, the raven on the train, a moth from a motel room in the river city, a particular kind of ground beetle she had found in the garden of Henley's college friend, a water strider she had drawn from a bridge over the river, its legs making six small depressions in the surface without breaking it.

Henley's text was growing around Bree's images the way a garden grows around its structures — not mechanically, not following a plan exactly, but responding, finding the spaces the structures opened and filling them with something that was both independent and dependent. He wrote about the water strider. He wrote: To move across the surface of something without breaking it is a kind of expertise. Not bravery. Not indifference to the depth beneath. Simply the knowledge of how to distribute weight, how to make the contact so light that the thing you are moving across does not feel the full truth of what you are. He crossed this out. He wrote it again differently. He crossed that out too. He wrote: The surface is not a barrier. It is a membrane. The water strider knows this. It does not try to cross. It simply moves.

He read this to Bree. She was at the desk with her etching tools, working on a new plate. She did not stop working while he read. When he finished she said: Keep that one.

He kept it.

The college friend's name was Abby and she was a composer who worked at a music school and who in the evenings played piano in the front room with the door open, the music spilling into the hallway and the kitchen where Bree and Henley ate and talked and did the small maintenance of a working life. Abby played from memory — she had hundreds of pieces memorized, she said, not as a feat but as a necessity, because she thought better when she wasn't reading the score. The music was mostly quiet, nocturnal, the kind of music that has space in it, that respects silence as part of itself.

One evening Abby played something she had composed herself, something slow and spare that seemed to have no key center, or multiple key centers held simultaneously, and Bree put down her pen and listened with her eyes closed and Henley stopped writing and they both listened to Abby playing her own music in the front room, and afterward they talked about it for an hour, about what it had done and how and whether there was a relationship between that way of organizing sound and the way they were trying to organize image and text.

Abby listened to their description of the project. She said: It sounds like a kind of fieldwork.

Bree said: That's exactly it.

Abby said: I want to see it when it's done.

Bree looked at Henley. Henley looked at Bree. They had not yet talked specifically about what done would mean, what the finished object would look like, how it would be made and in what number and for whom. Done was a word that had been in the future tense, not yet requiring specificity.

But here was someone who wanted to see it when it was done. Here was the object being requested before it existed. They felt the reality of this — the specific gravity of a thing being wanted.

Bree said: When it's done, we'll send you a copy.

She meant it. They both knew she meant it.

* * *

Chapter Sixteen: The Letter from Fentress

It arrived forwarded twice: first to the warehouse city, then to Abby's address, arriving a month after Fentress had sent it. He had addressed it to them both, which they both noticed, the envelope bearing both their names in his spare, precise handwriting.

The letter said: I've been thinking about the thing you made here. I want to help you make more of them. I'm not asking for anything except that the work be good, which it already is. I have press time in February. Come if you can.

That was all. No sentiment, no elaboration. Fentress was a man who believed that an offer was sufficient and did not need to be accompanied by persuasion.

They read the letter at the kitchen table while Abby was at work. Outside it was raining, a winter rain that moved the bare branches of the tree in the yard in slow, considered arcs. Bree read the letter first and passed it to Henley. Henley read it and set it on the table.

He said: February.

She said: It's November now.

He said: Three months.

She said: The book needs three months.

This was not quite a decision and not quite a statement of fact. It was something between the two — a recognition of what was required and what was available and the fit between them. They had, without quite tracking it, made a large portion of what would become the book. The etching plates. The manuscript of The Ledger, which was now properly a manuscript, pages

of it, with clear sections and a logic to its sequencing. The wall above the desk wherever they were currently working, which had become a kind of external memory, a visible thinking-space pinned with drawings and text and the things that had been said that were worth keeping.

They needed to gather and shape what they had. They needed to make decisions about sequence, about the relationship between Bree's images and Henley's text, about what the final object would be, how big, how long, how made. Three months was right.

Bree got up and took paper from her bag and began making a list. Not a plan exactly, more an inventory of what existed: the etchings, numbered; the text, by section; the drawings that were candidates for inclusion; the materials they had or would need; the questions that were still open. The list went onto two sheets of paper and when she was done she read it aloud to Henley, who sat listening and occasionally interjecting, adding things she had missed or flagging things that needed reconsideration.

This was a pleasure they had discovered: the pleasure of thinking together. It was different from thinking alone and different from collaboration as they had each previously understood it. It was a third thing, something that happened between two people who had become fluent in each other's working, who had learned which silences meant continuing and which meant a question was forming, who had calibrated the pace of their

respective attentions well enough to be in the same room doing different things without friction.

Bree finished reading the list. She said: So we know what we have. Now we have to decide what the thing is.

Henley said: It's a book. Not quite a book. An object that has book qualities.

She said: Handmade. Printed on the Fentress press.

He said: Small edition. Thirty, forty copies.

She said: Numbered. Signed by both.

He said: Not expensive. Accessible. The kind of thing that goes to people who'll read it rather than collect it.

She said: Yes.

He said: Then we agree.

She said: We agree.

She put the list back in her bag. She picked up her pen and returned to the etching she had been working on before the letter arrived, a drawing of a small spider she had found in the corner of Abby's bathroom, rendered in the same spirit as all the others — with care, with attention, with the full and unapologetic seriousness it deserved.

* * *

Chapter Seventeen: The Winter Work

December was interior. They moved twice more — a short stay in a city with a good library where Henley spent several days in the reading room doing the research he had been deferring, looking at the books about natural history and visual perception and the practice of observation that sat behind the project's thinking — and then to a town near the sea again, not the same coast, a different one, a coast that faced a different ocean and had a different quality of light, softer, more diffuse, the sun arriving at a lower angle.

They rented a room for a month. This was new — the deliberate staying, the choice of a particular duration rather than the open-endedness that had characterized the coast and the warehouse city. The staying imposed a shape on the time, gave the work a deadline that was not external but internal, the shape of their own choosing.

Bree finished twelve etching plates. The plates were small, each one three inches by four inches, and they depicted twelve organisms from the Long Inventory: six invertebrates, three birds, two mammals observed in the field, and the last one — the unknown creature from the tide pool — which she had been working on the longest and which had been revised the most and which was, finally, right. She knew when a drawing was right the

way some people know when bread has proved sufficiently, by a quality of readiness that could not quite be explained but could not be mistaken.

Henley completed the text. The Ledger ran to approximately forty pages of the handwritten manuscript, which would compress to something shorter in the print shop's typeface. The sections had titles now, each one a description of a light condition: Grey flat light of the coast at ten in the morning. The particular yellow of old buildings in an inland city in late afternoon. Light through north-facing windows in a working room. The quality of light just before snow, which has a certain expectancy in it, like an indrawn breath.

Within each section, the text moved. It moved between Henley's direct observations and something more meditative, more discursive, his attempts to articulate what the practice of looking produced in the one who looked — not the facts of the world but the effect of the world on the attending self. He had not written this kind of prose before. He had written for his drawings and with his drawings, texts that explained or accompanied, that were subordinate to the visual. This was different. The text was standing on its own while also expecting company, expecting the etchings, shaped by the knowledge of them even before they were physically on the facing page.

He read drafts aloud to Bree. She listened as she worked. She said little, but what she said was precise and always useful — a sentence that was pulling too hard, a section that needed air, a passage that was doing

something interesting but had not quite arrived at it. He trusted her ear completely. He was not sure he had ever trusted another reader's ear completely, but he trusted hers, and this was a gift of a specific and immeasurable kind.

In this month they also did other things. They walked the coast in the late afternoons, the long low light of winter illuminating the beach at an angle that made the ordinary extraordinary — rocks casting long shadows, the foam of spent waves catching the gold of it, a child's lost glove on the sand in full ridiculous splendor. They played music together some evenings, Bree on the concertina, Henley on the guitar, developing a repertoire of tunes they both knew and learning each other's versions of them, the small differences between how Bree took a B-part and how Henley did. They cooked in the small kitchen of the rented room. They read. They slept.

The sleeping was simple and close and without drama. They slept in the same small room, and this proximity was ordinary by now, the ordinariness of it arrived at gradually over months, a naturalness that was not the absence of feeling but the presence of something steadier than feeling: ease, trust, the specific comfort of another person's breathing in the dark.

Neither of them said anything about this. There was nothing to say. It was simply true.

* * *

Chapter Eighteen: What the Work Required

They had a disagreement in January. Not a serious one — not a fracture, nothing dramatic — but real, the first time a genuine difference of view had required more than the easy navigation they had developed.

It was about the sequence. Henley wanted to open the book with the tide pool creature — the unknown thing, the unclassifiable organism, the creature without a name. He thought it announced the project's terms: not the familiar, not the known, not the thing you can identify and file. The unnamed thing as an argument for the quality of looking that the book embodied.

Bree thought this was wrong. Not wrong-wrong, but wrong for the book. She said: You can't open with the end. That plate is the culmination. Everything else is working toward it — the barnacles, the birds, the ordinary invertebrates. You have to earn the unknown thing. If you start with it, you give away the surprise and also you make it seem like the others are lesser, like they're just preamble. They're not preamble. They're the point.

Henley sat with this. He said: But the book isn't about the creatures. It's about looking. The creature is the purest image of the looking. It pulls the reader in.

Bree said: The reader is pulled in by the barnacles. The reader looks at the barnacle and thinks: I've never really looked at a barnacle. And then they look at the next one and they're already inside the practice. The unknown creature should come last. That's when they're ready for it.

He said: You're thinking about this like a reader.

She said: Yes. Because we're making it for readers.

He thought about this. He said: That's fair. But I think you're underestimating the image. The image is strong enough to open without preparation.

She said: I know the image is strong. I made it. That's why I want it at the end.

There was a silence. Not hostile, but held — each of them sitting with the full weight of their respective positions, which were not positions adopted for the sake of argument but genuine convictions held by two people who had spent a long time looking at the same material.

Henley said: Okay. We do it your way. And if it's wrong, we talk again.

Bree said: If it's wrong, we try the other way. But it won't be wrong.

She was right. When they laid out the sequence with the tide pool creature last, the book breathed correctly. The escalation was right. The journey from the known to the unknown followed the arc of any real

looking, the way sustained attention moves from recognition to revelation, from the named to the beyond-naming.

But Henley's challenge had produced something too: the opening now had to be stronger, had to justify itself against his argument that it was merely preamble. He revised the first text section to do more work, to establish more firmly from the beginning what kind of project this was, what it was asking of the reader, why the barnacle deserved the attention it was about to receive.

The disagreement had improved the book. Neither of them said this. It was simply true, and they both knew it, and the knowledge of it did something to their understanding of the work between them that was more than the sum of the particular resolution. It showed them that the friction, when it came, was useful. That the book needed both of them to be entirely themselves, not accommodating, not strategically yielding, but committed to their own vision and willing to argue for it, because the argument was where the good things happened.

Solomon had said: Wood is never finished changing. You make peace with that or you go mad.

The book was the wood.

* * *

Chapter Nineteen: Correspondence

Bree wrote letters. She had always written letters — actual letters, on paper, in envelopes, with stamps — as a matter of practice and preference. She said once that writing a letter was a way of thinking about someone specifically rather than generally, of calling up the full particularity of a person and directing a thought at that particularity. An email was general. A letter was addressed.

During the winter months she wrote to Osa, describing the second coast and the way it differed from the first. She wrote to Mariela, who had sent them a photograph of the large collage she had completed using the watercolor invitations Bree had sent for the salon as one of the materials — a detail Bree found wonderful, the way the invitations had become part of a different artwork, how things moved between people and were changed and became part of something new. She wrote to her aunt in the bay city, the aunt of the alpine flowers and the ornamental apple tree, who wrote back in her own hand, cramped and affectionate, with news of the garden and a pressed leaf from the apple tree included in the envelope.

Henley also wrote, but fewer letters. He was a better talker than writer in the personal mode — the formal prose of The Ledger was not at all how he expressed himself in ordinary correspondence, and he was aware of the gap between them and found it faintly uncomfortable. He called his father instead, from payphones when he could find them, from borrowed

phones when he couldn't. His father asked about the work and Henley described it in terms his father might recognize: a book, small, handmade, about what you see when you pay attention. His father was quiet for a moment and then said: Sounds like something worth doing. Which was high praise, in his father's register.

They wrote together, too. A card to Fentress confirming their arrival in February, composed jointly at the desk, each of them writing a sentence until the card was full. A note to Dov and Mariela thanking them for the salon that had put them on the same train, an event they now thought of as foundational, the train as the actual beginning of the book even if neither of them had known that at the time. A brief letter to Abby enclosing a proof print of one of the etchings, the water strider, which they thought she would appreciate, and which she wrote back about at length, saying that the drawing had the quality of the music she was trying to write — something hovering above what it rested on, making its weight almost irrelevant.

This correspondence was part of the project too, though not in any literal sense. It was the network of people who had contributed to the thing — whose rooms and shops and instruments and houses and conversations had provided material, had shaped the conditions in which the work was made. The book was private in the sense that the choices were private, the looking private, the particular quality of two people's attention trained on the world a thing that belonged to them. But it had been made in company,

in the company of Osa and Fentress and Solomon and Mariela and Abby and all the others, and that company was held in it somehow, invisible but present, like a smell absorbed by paper over time that you cannot quite identify but cannot imagine the paper without.

Part Five: Return to the Press

Chapter Twenty: February

They arrived in the northern river city in February. Fentress was at the print shop. He did not make a ceremony of their arrival. He had cleared a shelf for their materials, had set out papers he thought might work, had already inked and proofed the etching press to check its calibration. He said: You have a week. Let's see what you've got.

They showed him everything. The etchings, the manuscript, the sequence as they had laid it out in the rented room in January. Fentress looked at it all without speaking for a long time, which by now they understood was his form of engagement, the silence a form of serious attention. He picked up the tide pool plate last. He held it up to the light and examined the lines with the half-squint of a printer looking at an intaglio, assessing the depth of the bite, the fineness of the marks. He set it down.

He said: The text wants twelve-point Garamond. Nothing else. He said: The images want a printing paper with enough tooth to hold the ink but not so much it breaks the fine lines. He went to his paper shelves and pulled out a sheet and handed it to Bree. She felt it. She held it up to the light. She said yes.

He said: The pages should be seven inches by nine. Sewn sections. Covered in something plain. He looked at Henley. He said: Cloth or paper?

Henley said: Paper. Something made.

Fentress said: I have a Japanese tissue, very fine. We can paste it over boards.

They began.

The printing of twelve etching plates onto thirty-eight pages each — the edition they had settled on, thirty-five copies plus a small number of artist's proofs — was a physical process, laborious and meditative by turns. Bree printed the etchings herself. Fentress showed her the specific protocols of his press, the pressure settings, the inking method he preferred, and then stepped back and let her work. She was a careful and attentive learner. By the second day she was printing with a confidence that was not ease — etching printing is never easy, each pass of the press a small negotiation with the metal and the ink and the paper — but with the assurance of someone who understands the process well enough to respond to what the press is telling her.

Each print was slightly different. This was expected, was inevitable, was in fact a feature of intaglio printing that Bree had decided she valued rather than wanted to minimize. Each creature, in each copy of the book, would be slightly differently itself. The ink would settle slightly differently in the grooves. The pressure would be infinitesimally various. The paper would receive the image with its own particular character. Thirty-eight copies of

the tide pool creature, each one true to the plate and each one uniquely its own impression. This seemed right. This seemed, actually, like the point.

Henley set the type. He worked with Fentress on the typesetting, learning again the specific discipline of letterpress — the way you must think about the text differently when it is being set in physical type, each letter a physical object that must be found and placed and locked. The slowness of it was instructive. He read each sentence several times in the setting of it and found things he wanted to change and sometimes changed them, substituting a word, adjusting a phrase, which required finding the new letters and swapping them in, a process that focused the editorial mind with a specificity that reading a manuscript on paper did not quite produce.

The book was being made. Not assembled from pre-existing parts, but made, each stage of the making a form of thinking, each decision (this pressure, this ink, this spacing, this paper) a decision about meaning. Fentress was present throughout, not directing but available, answering questions with a precision that was generous in its efficiency.

On the third evening they ate together at a table in the print shop, Fentress having produced from somewhere — a back room, a cupboard — bread and soup and a bottle of something. They ate in the shop smell of ink and paper. Fentress said: What will you call it?

They had been calling it the project. They had been calling it the book. They had several private names for it, names that worked in conversation between them but were not titles, were not the right thing for the cover.

Bree said: The document. In the older sense.

Henley said: What Osa said.

Fentress looked at them. He said: That's it?

Bree said: We'll think about whether to put it on the cover or not.

Fentress said: Put it on. He refilled their cups. He said: The ones no one asked for are the ones that last.

They looked at each other. Bree's face had on it the expression it had when something was right — not surprised, but confirmed, as though the rightness was not new but was being recognized from the place inside her that had always known it.

Henley said: It goes on the cover.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-One: Assembling

The assembling of the book took two days. Bree had the steadier hands for the sewing and she sewed all thirty-eight copies, each section of eight pages gathered and folded and then sewn to the next with a waxed

thread in a dark grey that she had chosen because it was visible and she wanted the sewing to be seen, to make legible the structure of the book, the way it was made.

Henley made the covers. He and Fentress cut the boards to size and prepared the Japanese tissue, and Henley pasted them together with a bone folder and a quiet deliberateness that surprised Fentress, who had expected the writer to be less competent with his hands. Henley said: I grew up with someone who used his hands. He did not elaborate. Fentress did not ask.

The title went on the cover in letterpress, set small, in the same Garamond as the text. THE DOCUMENT. Below it, in the same type, slightly smaller: DRAWINGS BY BREE — WRITINGS BY HENLEY. Their surnames were there in full in the colophon, on the last page, where the printing details were recorded. But on the cover just the first names, which Henley had suggested and Bree had agreed to without discussion, both of them feeling that the first names were the right names for this, that surnames belonged to the official world and this was not that.

When the first copy was completely assembled — boards and text block sewn together, the cover clean and the pages opening smoothly, the printing visible and correct, the etchings rich and dark on their cream paper — Bree held it. She held it for a moment the way you hold something that has come from a long way. She opened it to the first image, the barnacle plate, which was the first in the sequence and which was exactly

as she had intended it: dark and precise and alive with the specific geometry of how barnacles arrange themselves, their shells not random but organized by the logic of space and competition and the need for a surface and the luck of finding one.

She turned the pages slowly. Image and text, image and text. Henley's words, which she knew almost by heart by now, arriving in the Garamond type with a quality of having always been this, of having always been ink on paper rather than pencil in a journal. The typeface suited him. It was spare and old and slightly formal and had a warmth underneath the formality, which was also him.

She reached the tide pool creature. Last. The unnamed thing, the unclassifiable organism, the argument at the end of the book for the importance of what exceeds your categories. She looked at it for a long time.

Then she passed the copy to Henley.

He held it and turned the pages in the same direction she had, slowly, the same attention. Fentress watched them both but said nothing. He had seen people hold finished books before. He had seen delight, relief, disappointment, the blank expression of someone who had expected something different and was processing the gap. What he saw in Bree and Henley was none of these things. It was simpler and less theatrical. It was

recognition. They were recognizing the book as the thing that had been there all along, under all the work, waiting for the work to reveal it.

He said: Well.

Neither of them replied. The word was enough.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Copies

They numbered them together, sitting at Fentress's long workbench with the finished books stacked between them. One of thirty-five. Two of thirty-five. The pencil making its small specific marks in the colophon, the fraction of an edition that assigns each copy its place in the whole, that says: this one is this one, no other.

They kept three copies each. They gave Fentress five, which was more than he had asked for and which he accepted without protest, understanding that the gift was significant, that it carried information about how they valued his part in the work.

The rest they packed carefully in a flat carton with tissue paper between each copy. They had a list. The list had Osa's name on it, and Mariela's, and Dov's, and Fentress had already been accounted for, and Abby's, and Solomon's, and Petra's, and several others — the painter from the building, the woman from the art supply shop, the woman with paint on

her wrists who had refilled Henley's cup without asking. The people who had been part of the making without making, who had been present in the way that the places were present, shaping the conditions rather than the content.

Bree addressed the envelopes by hand. She wrote each address carefully, the italic deliberate as always. Henley wrapped each copy in a sheet of the Japanese tissue and taped the tissue with a small piece of the waxed thread, so that the opening of the package would have something of the character of the book itself — handmade, considered, made with a person in mind.

They mailed them from the post office on the main street of the northern city. The post office was a building from another era, with a marble counter and high ceilings and the specific formality of a civic institution that believes in its own necessity. The woman behind the counter weighed each package and stamped it and added it to the stack with an equanimity that was itself a kind of dignity, the dignity of a person who handles other people's communications all day and treats each one with the same care.

Outside, they stood in the February air. Cold, dry, with a quality of light that Henley noted — the particular brightness of late winter sun, stronger than it had any right to be, warm on the upturned face even when

the air was cold. He thought: this goes in the next book. He did not say it aloud.

Bree said: What do we do now?

He said: Whatever comes next.

She said: I want to go somewhere I've never been.

He said: Where?

She said: I don't know. Somewhere. She looked down the street, the winter brightness on the storefronts, the few people moving purposefully in coats. She said: Somewhere that doesn't know us yet.

He understood this. The book was out in the world now, in the hands of the people on the list, and there would be responses to it — he was certain of that, certain in the way you are certain about a true thing — and the responses would be good and the good responses would produce a satisfaction that was real and would also produce, equally real, the desire to have already moved on to the next thing, to be already in the middle of the next unknown, because the known, however much you loved it, could not make you that specific way alive that only the not-yet-known could make you.

He said: All right. Where haven't you been?

She considered. She named a place, a direction. North and east. A region she had read about in a book, mountainous, forested, with rivers and particular birds and a quality of isolation that interested her.

He said: I've never been there either.

She said: Good.

They went back to the print shop to collect their bags. Fentress was at the press. He did not stop what he was doing when they came in, but as they gathered their things he said, without turning: Come back when you have the next one.

Bree said: How do you know there'll be a next one?

He said: There's always a next one. He ran the press. He said: That's the thing about making. It doesn't stop. You just go somewhere else to do it.

They thanked him. They shook his hand. They went out.

The train north and east left at three.

Part Six: After

Chapter Twenty-Three: Osa's Letter

The letter from Osa arrived six weeks after they had mailed the book. It reached them at a guesthouse in a mountain town, forwarded from the northern city by Fentress, who had their itinerary in the form of a rough map Bree had drawn for him before they left.

Osa's handwriting was like Osa: economical, clear, with no wasted marks. She wrote:

The book arrived last week. I have read it three times. This is unusual for me — I don't generally return to things. But I found that the third reading was different from the first. Something about returning to the barnacle after the unknown creature at the end. It changed how I saw the barnacle. I cannot tell you exactly how. You would understand better than I can say it.

I showed it to the couple from the north who stayed here last month. They borrowed it for an evening and returned it the next morning and said almost nothing, which in my experience means it did what it was supposed to do.

The bird in my room — the blue-green ceramic one from the shelf, which I was going to tell you to take with you and then forgot — I have now

put on the windowsill. It looks better there. Better sightlines. Thank you for leaving it.

Come back when you're near the coast again.

She had signed it simply: Osa.

Bree read the letter standing in the corridor of the guesthouse where the post had been left. She read it twice. Then she folded it and put it in her bag, in the interior pocket where she kept things she was certain about.

She found Henley in the common room reading. She handed him the letter without saying anything. He read it. He handed it back.

He said: The barnacle.

She said: Yes.

He said: That's what we were trying to do. Exactly that.

She said: I know.

They did not elaborate. There was nothing to elaborate. Osa had described something that neither of them had been entirely able to articulate even to each other, the recursive quality of the book's attention, the way the ending changed the beginning, the way the journey through the pages was meant to change what you saw when you looked at an ordinary thing. She had felt it. She had described it. The fact of this — the fact that

the book had done the thing it was made to do, had done it for at least one person sitting alone in a guesthouse with the sea nearby — was something Bree held very still in herself, as though it might dissolve if she jostled it.

Later she wrote back to Osa. She told her about the mountain town, the birds here that were different from the coastal birds, a particular variety of crossbill she had drawn that morning on the road out of town, its beak crossed like a small elegant tool for solving a problem unique to itself, which it was. She told her about the way the light at altitude had a different quality, thinner, more directional, casting shadows with edges so sharp they seemed cut rather than cast. She did not say much about the response to the book except: it matters that you felt that. It is the thing we made it for.

The crossbill, she enclosed, in the form of a small drawing on paper she had torn from the back of the working sketchbook, which was almost full.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Mountain Town

The mountain town was called something in the local language that meant something about water — they were told this by the man at the guesthouse desk, who was pleased to be asked and even more pleased when Bree wrote it in her sketchbook, the name and its meaning, which she made him spell out twice. She wrote it in the margin beside a drawing she had

made of the view from the window: ridge after ridge of forested hills in the characteristic blue haze of altitude and distance, the near trees clear and the far ones bluing and the farthest ones pure atmosphere.

They stayed longer than they had planned. This kept happening. They had no schedule, no calendar of commitments — Henley had sent his illustrations for the children's book by post from the coast, the deadline long since met — and the not-having-a-schedule was both a freedom and a discipline, the freedom of being able to stay when staying was right, the discipline of having to decide for themselves when moving was called for, to develop an internal sense of it.

What they found in the mountain town was not new material exactly but a new quality of the material they had been accumulating. The creatures at altitude were different from the coastal ones — sturdier, more compact, adapted to cold and thin air in ways that were visible in their structures. Bree drew them with the same attention she brought to everything, but found that the drawings had a different quality here, less delicate, more structural, the adaptation showing through. She began to think about a second project — not a continuation of the first but a conversation with it, a document of a different ecosystem, the mountains as an answer to the coast.

Henley wrote new sections. Not for the book, which was finished, was already in the world, was already, in its small edition, passing through

people's hands and doing its work. These were sections that might become a next book, or might not — might become something else, might be the beginning of a process he did not yet have a name for. He wrote about the crossbill's beak, which he called in his notes the perfect instrument, not in spite of its strangeness but because of it, because it had evolved into precisely the form required by the specific problem of extracting seeds from cones, a form that would make no sense except in relation to the pine trees, the same way a key makes no sense except in relation to its lock, and how this was not a limitation but a completeness.

He read this to Bree. She said: Keep that. That's the opening.

He said: Of what?

She said: Whatever comes next.

He wrote it in the waterproof journal. He underlined the last sentence, the one about the key and the lock, which he thought was doing something that might take him a long time to fully understand, that was perhaps beyond the children's-book illustration brief and the fieldwork document and The Ledger and into something more complicated, something about the way meaning required a counterpart, how understanding was always relational, how you could not know what a thing was for without knowing what it addressed.

He thought about this for several days. He did not rush it. Bree, watching him think without interrupting him, was learning something about patience that was different from the patience she had already learned — not the patience of a drawing that needed time to arrive, but the patience of a thought that needed to find its shape.

At night in the mountain town they could hear water. A river below the town, moving in the cold with its constant unreflective purpose. They lay listening to it in the dark, the sound of the water a kind of presence in the room, a fourth thing in the room with them and the cold and the dark. Not disruptive. Not requiring anything. Just there, as rivers are there, going about what rivers go about, indifferent to the witness and made more beautiful by it.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Five: A Letter from Mariela

Mariela's letter was longer than Osa's. She was a person who used words the way she used materials in her collages — generously, with a sense that the more she placed the more the composition could do, with the understanding that excess could be trimmed at the end but absence could not be retroactively corrected.

She wrote:

Dov played one of his voices while I read it. Not on purpose — he was in the next room and had no idea what I was reading. But it seemed right, the sound of the voice and the words and images together. He came in when I had finished and I showed him the book and he sat very still for a long time turning the pages, which as you know is unusual for Dov, who is not a still person. When he finished he put it on the table and said: They made something real. I am not paraphrasing. That is exactly what he said.

The image of the barn swallow — I think it is a barn swallow, the one in profile — is the best drawing of a bird I have seen in a very long time. It has the quality of my best collage pieces, the quality of having been made by someone who was not trying to represent the bird but to understand it, and understanding it made something the bird might recognize if birds recognized things. I don't know if that makes sense. I think you understand me.

I am making a new collage. It is large, larger than anything I have made. I am going to use one of the prints as part of it — not the original, I bought a second one from Fentress, who I wrote to after receiving mine — the water strider. I hope that's all right. The water strider needs to be in the composition. The composition needs the water strider.

The boy in the train drawing — I assume that is Henley. I hope he knows he has been drawn well. Not flatteringly. Truly. There is a difference and it is important.

She had signed it: with great love, Mariela.

They read this letter together, sitting at the table in the mountain guesthouse room. When they finished Henley said: The train drawing. I'd forgotten she could see that.

Bree said: It's near the back of the working book. I included it.

He said: You should have told me.

She said: Why?

He said: I don't know. Warning.

She said: Were you not drawn well?

He was quiet for a moment. He said: You were kind.

She said: I was accurate.

He said: Those aren't the same thing.

She said: With you they are.

He looked at her. She was looking at the letter, not at him, but he could see the corner of her expression, the quality of attention she gave to things she meant. He had learned this expression. He had learned a great many of her expressions, the way you learn a language by living in it rather

than studying it, so that the knowing is in the body rather than the mind, operational rather than theoretical.

He said: Thank you. For the drawing.

She said: Thank you for sitting still.

He said: I was asleep.

She said: That too.

They wrote back to Mariela together, in the same alternating-sentence way. They told her the water strider was hers to use. They told her about the mountain town, the crossbill, the river at night. Henley told her to tell Dov that the something real was made partly in the long room at the salon, in the sound of the voices and the quality of the evening.

Bree added, at the end, in her own hand: The composition needs the water strider. Yes. That is exactly how it works.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Next Work

Spring came slowly to the mountains, as spring comes slowly at altitude, grudgingly, in fits — a warm day, then a return to cold, then warmth again, each warm interval slightly longer than the last, until finally

the balance tipped and the cold was the interval and the warmth was the condition.

They were still in the mountain town when this happened. They had been there nearly two months. The guesthouse owner had given them a long-term rate without being asked and had stopped treating them as guests and started treating them as something more like temporary residents, which was a distinction Bree appreciated. She had begun to know the town — its rhythms, its weekly market, the bakery that opened at five in the morning and had the best bread at five-thirty and acceptable bread by eight, the coffee shop where the woman had told Henley not to stop, which had a different woman now, or the same woman on different days, Bree was not certain.

She had three new plates finished and six more in progress. The mountain series was developing its own visual language, distinct from the coastal one — bolder marks, more contrast, the fine crosshatching she had used for the delicate coastal invertebrates replaced with something more structural, less continuous. She was using the mountain light's edginess. The drawings were more assertive.

Henley had written forty pages. The next book was not quite a book yet — it was closer to what The Ledger had been in its first year, accumulating rather than shaping, building a mass of material that would eventually require organization. He was comfortable with this stage. He had

learned, in the making of the first book, that the early stages were not wasted even when they felt directionless, that the apparently digressive paths were often the paths that mattered most, that the structure revealed itself from within the material rather than being imposed on it.

They talked about the new work differently than they had talked about the first one. The first one they had talked about with the careful tentativeness of people proposing something fragile. Now they talked about it the way you talk about ongoing work, the shorthand of shared understanding, references to specific pages or images that stood for larger ideas, the ability to disagree without the friction of uncertainty.

In the spring, in the mountain town, they went for walks in the afternoons as the snow retreated up the hillsides. The mud season was extreme at altitude — the paths turned to deep sucking mud, the boots came back caked, there was a ritual of boot-cleaning at the guesthouse door that became its own small pleasure, the scraping and washing, the line of wet boots by the radiator. Bree drew the mud. She drew the specific character of different kinds of mud — road mud, forest-path mud, the grey mud at the edge of the snowline that was half-snow and half-earth and had a crystalline structure visible at close range. She drew it small and precise with the same absolute seriousness she brought to everything.

Henley watched her draw the mud and thought: this is what I want to write about. Not the mud specifically. But the quality of seriousness that

finds the mud worth drawing. The practice, not the object of the practice. The long patience of sustained attention.

He thought about what Solomon had said: no one wants to take the time the thing needs. He thought about Bree crouched in the mud at the edge of the snowline with her fine pen, unhurried, giving the mud exactly the time it needed. He thought about the unknown creature in the tide pool and all the time she had given it, the three hours of drawing that had produced the image at the end of their first book, the image that changed how you saw the barnacle when you went back to the beginning.

He took out his journal and wrote: The subject is the attention. The object changes. The attention does not.

He looked at it. He said it aloud. Bree looked up from the mud drawing. He said it again.

She said: Yes. That's it. That's the book.

He wrote: BOOK TWO underneath it, in capitals, with a box around it, the box a way of marking the moment, of saying: here it is. Here is where it started.

Later he would show this page of the journal to people who asked about the work, how they had started, where it had come from. He would say: She was drawing mud. He would mean: the seriousness of the drawing

was the thing. The mud was incidental. Necessary, as the barnacle had been necessary, but incidental. The serious attention was the point.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Dov's Instrument

Dov sent a package. It arrived at the mountain guesthouse, oversize, padded, with a note in Dov's handwriting on the outside of the wrapper: fragile but more resilient than it looks.

Inside was an instrument. One of his voices, the ones he named and gave to people he thought would play them. This one had a narrow body of pale wood and strings of gut and a name written in small letters on the inside of the sound hole: Bree. He had made it for her. It had taken him, the enclosed note said, about three months, during which he had thought often about the concertina at the salon and the quality of sound she made with it, the way she played as if the music were already there in the room and the instrument was merely helping it become audible.

The note also said: I heard something like what you're making — a document, Mariela tells me — and I wanted to make something in response to it. The instrument is a response. Play it and it will tell you what it's for.

Bree sat with the instrument in her lap for a long time before she played it. She ran her hands over the wood, which was smooth in the way

that good wood is smooth, not the smoothness of over-finishing but the smoothness of the material understood and worked with rather than against. She looked at the strings. She looked at her name in the sound hole.

Then she played it.

The sound it made was unexpected. Not unpleasant — not strange, even — but unexpected. Lower than she thought it would be, and with a resonance that was somehow more than the size of the instrument seemed to account for, a warmth that did not quite correspond to the small pale body of the thing. She played a simple tune, one she knew well enough that the knowing was in her hands, and the tune came out different from how it would have been on the concertina, lower and slower and with an undertone she had not planned.

Henley stopped writing. He listened without looking up, which was how he listened to music that required real listening.

When she stopped he said: What does Dov call it?

She looked at the note. She said: He just calls it by my name.

Henley said: Then that's what it's called.

She played it again. Different tune, a faster one, and the instrument found a way with that too, found the thing in it that the instrument

particularly suited. She thought about what Dov had said: play it and it will tell you what it's for. She was beginning to understand. The instrument was for the slow tunes, for the tunes that had space in them, that allowed the resonance to develop and settle and be heard. It was not a dance-tune instrument. It was a thinking-tune instrument.

She played it every evening after that. The guesthouse owner's children came to listen sometimes, standing in the doorway of the common room where Bree usually played, small and patient and serious in the way of children who are encountering music that they do not quite have a category for. One of them, a girl of about six, asked Bree once: Is that a song?

Bree said: It's on its way to being a song.

The girl thought about this. She said: Where is it going?

Bree said: I don't know yet. I'll let you know when I find out.

The girl seemed satisfied with this answer. She came back the next evening and the evening after that.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Something About Time

They had been moving together for eight months. This was not a number they had been tracking, but they arrived at it obliquely, in the

course of an evening conversation about the project, when they were trying to date something and worked backward and found that the train from the salon had been in early autumn and it was now late spring, which was eight months, which was more than either of them had been expecting.

It was not that the time had passed quickly. It had passed at its own speed, varied, slower in the mountain winter and faster in the productive months of coast and warehouse. It was that the accumulation of it was larger than it seemed from the inside, as accumulations often are.

Eight months of shared working, shared meals, shared walking, shared rooms. Eight months of mornings and evenings and the small negotiations of two people in close proximity. Eight months of knowing someone's sounds and rhythms and habits, which was a form of knowing that was different from and deeper than the knowing of their thoughts or their work, different from and perhaps more intimate than talking.

Bree thought about this, lying awake one night with the mountain river audible through the window. She was not troubled by the thinking. She was simply considering it, the way she considered a drawing that was almost finished, looking for what remained to be done. Eight months of this person, she thought. Eight months of this specific light falling on this specific work. And it had not diminished. The interest had not worn to habit. She still wanted to knock on his door with the thing she had found. She still listened for his reading-aloud with a pleasure that had not lessened.

She thought: I know what that means. She thought: that means something.

She thought: we should talk about it sometime.

Henley, in his bed on the other side of the room, was not asleep either. He was thinking about something he had written that afternoon, a passage about a bird he had watched from the window — not the crossbill, a different one, a small brown finch that had been on the same branch for a long time, long enough that he had made notes, long enough that its continued presence on the branch had begun to seem like a choice rather than a coincidence. He had written about the quality of the bird's waiting, which was not impatient and not passive but something between and outside both, something that had in it the full preparedness of readiness, the thing athletes talk about as the state before action, when you are entirely assembled and available.

He thought: I want to write something that has that quality. Not about the bird. As the bird. Written from inside the readiness.

He thought: I should tell Bree.

He thought: she would understand exactly what I mean.

He thought: I know what that means.

He lay listening to the river.

In the morning they both woke early and found themselves already talking about the work before the tea was made, the day's thinking continuous with the night's, no seam between sleep and labor, no preamble required. This was also something they had not spoken about. They were each aware of it in the way you are aware of a good thing: carefully, without looking at it too directly, for fear of altering it by the act of attention.

But attention was what they did. It was their practice and their discipline and the thing that made the books. To not attend was not in either of them.

So perhaps it was only a matter of time.

* * *

Chapter Twenty-Nine: The Unfinished Plate

Bree had a plate she could not finish. It had been started in the warehouse city and carried through the winter and the mountain town. It was the last plate for the second project, or she thought it was — she thought she knew what belonged on it, had sketched it many times in the working sketchbook. But she kept going back to the metal and starting and stopping, reaching a certain point and finding that the thing she wanted to do was slightly beyond what the plate was allowing her to do.

The subject was not a creature. This was new. All the other plates were creatures — things observed, specific, particular. This one was the rose garden from Henley's dream. She had asked him to describe it again, several times, over the months, and he had described it each time and each description had been slightly different, not because he was changing his account but because different aspects of it came forward in different tellings, the dream's content varying in emphasis without varying in fact.

She was trying to draw a place she had not been and could not go: a specific garden in a specific winter, in a specific child's experience, from the inside of someone else's sleep. She was trying to draw something that was neither quite real nor quite imagined, that existed in the overlap between a man's remembered dream and her vision of that dream.

This was harder than the barnacle.

She worked on the plate in the evenings, when the day's regular work was done. Henley sat at the desk. She sat at the other end with the plate and the needle. The scratching sound of the needle was different from the scratching sound of the pencil but had the same quality of direction, the same sense of a mark being made with intention.

One evening he looked up from what he was doing and watched her work for a while. She did not notice him watching — or if she did, gave no sign. She was leaning close to the plate, the needle moving in very small

strokes, building something in the lower left corner of the composition. He could see the plate from where he was sitting, the scratched lines catching the lamplight. He could not see what she was making. He could see the quality of her concentration, which was extreme — not tense, not pressured, but gathered, all of her assembled behind the needle's point.

He said, very quietly so as not to break anything: How is it?

She said, without looking up: Getting there.

He said: What's in the corner?

She said: Soil. You. Three years old.

He looked at the plate. From where he was sitting he could see the beginnings of a shape in the lower left corner, very small, crouching. A child, small enough to be dwarfed by the rose canes above it, its hands in the earth.

He said: Bree.

She looked up. She must have heard something in the way he said her name, because she set down the needle and looked at him directly, without the usual working-half-attention.

He said: That's the most — He stopped.

She said: I know.

He said: How did you —

She said: You told me. Every time you told me, you told me something more. I was listening.

He said: You were always listening.

She said: Yes.

They looked at each other for a moment in the lamplight, in the quiet of the mountain room, with the river below and the work between them and the plate with its small crouching figure in the corner.

Then she picked up the needle again. She said: I have to finish the soil.

He said: I know. Go ahead.

He turned back to the desk. He picked up his pencil. He wrote something. He crossed it out. He wrote it again, exactly as it had been. He drew a box around it.

The river ran.

* * *

Chapter Thirty: The Document That Continues

Summer came to the mountain town in the form of warmth and flowers and the melting of the last snow from the high places, visible from the guesthouse window as a progressive whitening of the peaks, the treeline exposed, the high meadows released. They watched this from the window some mornings with their tea. The pace of the thaw was instructive — not gradual in any smooth sense, but variable, surging on warm days, pausing on cold ones, each morning a slightly different version of the landscape.

Bree finished the rose garden plate. She printed a proof on a scrap of the cream paper she had brought from Fentress and held it in the light and looked at it for a long time. The small crouching figure in the lower left, among the bare canes, the winter rose garden around it, the chimney in the background — the whole thing rendered with the specific quality that had informed all the coastal plates, the attention that wanted to understand rather than merely depict, the care that was also a form of love.

She showed it to Henley without comment, the way you hand someone a letter you have written for them.

He took it. He held it. He said: The hands.

She had drawn the child's hands in the soil. The fingers slightly spread, pressing down, or pressing in, tasting the earth not with the mouth but with the palms. The pose was one she had arrived at through many

drafts in the working sketchbook and she had not entirely known it was right until she scratched it into the metal, until the needle made it true.

He said: You made it beautiful.

She said: It was already beautiful. I just looked until I found it.

He thought: that is the whole project, in one sentence. He did not say this. He wrote it in the journal.

They were nearly ready to move. Not because the mountain town had stopped giving them material — it had not, would not have, any place continued to yield if you continued to look — but because the project had reached a natural pause, the point at which you have gathered enough to begin the shaping, and the shaping required a different kind of time and a different kind of place, and both of them could feel this the way you feel the end of a season without consulting a calendar.

They packed the plates carefully, wrapped in tissue, in a flat box that had once held chocolates, which Bree had bought and eaten quickly for the sake of the box. They packed the manuscript pages, the journal pages, the wall of evidence they had accumulated and annotated: Osa's napkin, the proof from the first printing, the letter from Fentress, the drawing of the water strider Abby had written about. The wall came down. The room resumed its character as a guesthouse room, neutral, waiting for the next person.

On the last morning, early, Bree took out the Bree-instrument — Dov's voice, her name in the sound hole — and played for a while in the common room. The slow tune that the instrument was for, the thinking tune. The guesthouse owner's daughter appeared in the doorway, the same small girl who had asked about the song and where it was going.

Bree said: I think I know where it's going now.

The girl said: Where?

Bree said: Somewhere I haven't been yet.

The girl thought about this. She said: That sounds far.

Bree said: Not too far.

She played the tune to its end and then again from the beginning, and the second time through it did sound like it was going somewhere, like there was a destination in it, the shape of the thing becoming clearer in the repetition the way the thaw had made the mountain clearer, progressive, one morning's warmth at a time.

Henley came in with the bags. He stopped in the doorway, listening. He stood there until she finished.

Then he said: Ready?

She set the instrument in its case, the case she had made herself from a piece of canvas lined with the same Japanese tissue that had covered the books. She stood up. She said: Ready.

They thanked the guesthouse owner, who pressed food on them for the journey and walked them to the gate and stood at the gate watching them go with the expression of someone who had seen many people go and understood that going was as necessary as staying and that neither one was a choice against the other.

They walked down through the town to the station. The morning was clear and bright, the mountain light particular and thin at this elevation, the shadows hard, the colors of everything intensified. Bree looked at all of it. Henley walked beside her, not looking at the same things she was looking at but looking, attending, practicing the practice. The town was itself and then it was behind them and then it was gone.

They had, between them, three notebooks of new material, twelve etching plates, forty pages of prose, a dream drawn in metal, an instrument made of pale wood with a name in the sound hole, a list of addresses for the second edition's copies, and the quality of attention that had made all of it possible and would, wherever they went next, wherever the project required them to go, continue to make more, because making was not something they did at certain times in certain places and stopped. Making was how they moved through the world. The world moved through them in return,

leaving its marks: the barnacle, the water strider, the raven's lateral gaze, the mud at the snowline, the soil in the rose garden of a dream.

The train came. It was the kind of train that went slowly, stopping at small stations along the way, giving the landscape time to be itself before the next landscape began. They found seats by the window. They put their bags in the overhead and the instrument case on the seat between them and their work materials on the small table. Outside, the mountain town receded along the tracks, the peaked roofline, the church, the bakery, the coffee shop, Dov's voice made audible in the mind as memory as the actual voice settled quiet in its case.

Bree opened the working sketchbook to a new page. The page was blank. This was not daunting. The blank page was the opportunity, the prepared ground, the clean surface that made the next mark possible. She picked up her pen.

Henley took out the journal. He turned to the page with the box around it: THE SUBJECT IS THE ATTENTION. Beside it, now, he wrote a second sentence. He had been working toward it for three months. He wrote: The object changes. The attention does not. It remains, committed, patient, ready, looking.

He read it to Bree. She was drawing already — she had begun with the train, with the window, with the motion of the landscape outside rendered in quick assured marks. She did not stop drawing when he read it.

She said: Yes.

He said: That's the opening.

She said: Then we have a beginning.

He said: We have a beginning.

And the train went on, through the spring country, through the light that was changing at every window, through the small and inexhaustible world.